

7. The Royal Banquet

“Right this way.”

“Follow us.”

“Come along.”

“Step lively.”

“Here we go,” they shouted, hopping from the wagon and bounding up the broad marble stairway. Milo and Tock followed close behind. It was a strange-looking palace, and if he didn’t know better Milo would have said that it looked exactly like an enormous book, standing on end, with its front door in the lower part of the binding just where they usually place the publisher’s name.

Once inside, they hurried down a long hallway, which glittered with crystal chandeliers and echoed with their footsteps. The walls and ceiling were covered with mirrors, whose reflections danced dizzily along

with them, and the footmen bowed coldly.

“We must be terribly late,” gasped the earl nervously as they reached the tall doors of the banquet hall.

It was a vast room, full of people loudly talking and arguing. The long table was carefully set with gold plates and linen napkins. An attendant stood behind each chair, and at the center, raised slightly above the others, was a throne covered in crimson cloth. Directly behind, on the wall, was the royal coat of arms, flanked by the flags of Dictionopolis.

Milo noticed many of the people he had seen in the market place. The letter man was busy explaining to an interested group the history of the W, and off in a corner the Humbug and the Spelling Bee were arguing fiercely about nothing at all. Officer Shrift wandered through the crowd, suspiciously muttering, “Guilty, guilty, they’re all guilty,” and, on noticing Milo, brightened visibly and commented in passing, “Is it six million years already? My, how time flies.”



announced to the startled guests:

“KING AZAZ THE UNABRIDGED.”

The king strode through the door and over to the table and settled his great bulk onto the throne, calling irritably, “Places, everyone. Take your places.”

He was the largest man Milo had ever seen, with a great stomach, large piercing eyes, a gray beard that reached to his waist, and a silver signet ring on the little finger of his left hand. He also wore a small crown and a robe with the letters of the alphabet beautifully embroidered all over it.

“What have we here?” he said, staring down at Tock and Milo as everyone else took his place.

Everyone seemed quite grumpy about having to wait for lunch, and they were all relieved to see the tardy guests arrive.

“Certainly glad you finally made it, old man,” said the Humbug, cordially pumping Milo’s hand. “As guest of honor you must choose the menu of course.”

“Oh my,” he thought, not knowing what to say.

“Be quick about it,” suggested the Spelling Bee. “I’m famished—f-a-m-i-s-h-e-d.”

As Milo tried to think, there was an ear-shattering blast of trumpets, entirely off key, and a page



“If you please,” said Milo, “my name is Milo and this is Tock. Thank you very much for inviting us to your banquet, and I think your palace is beautiful.”



“Exquisite,” corrected the duke.
“Lovely,” counseled the minister.
“Handsome,” recommended the count.
“Pretty,” hinted the earl.

“Charming,” submitted the undersecretary.

“SILENCE,” suggested the king. “Now, young man, what can you do to entertain us? Sing songs? Tell stories? Compose sonnets? Juggle plates? Do tumbling tricks? Which is it?”

“I can’t do any of those things,” admitted Milo.



“What an ordinary little boy,” commented the king. “Why, my cabinet members can do all sorts of things. The duke here can make mountains out of molehills. The minister splits hairs. The count makes hay while the sun shines. The earl leaves no stone unturned. And the undersecretary,” he finished ominously, “hangs by a thread. Can’t you do anything at all?”

“I can count to a thousand,” offered Milo.

“A-A-R-G-H, numbers! Never mention numbers here. Only use them when we absolutely have to,” growled Azaz disgustedly. “Now, why don’t you and Tock come up here and sit next to me, and we’ll have some dinner?”

“Are you ready with the menu?” reminded the Humbug.

“Well,” said Milo, remembering that his mother had always told him to eat lightly when he was a guest, “why don’t we have a light meal?”

“A light meal it shall be,” roared the bug, waving his arms.

The waiters rushed in carrying large serving platters and set them on the table in front of the king. When he lifted the covers, shafts of brilliant-colored light leaped from the plates and bounced around the ceiling, the walls, across the floor, and out the windows.

“Not a very substantial meal,” said the Humbug, rubbing his eyes, “but quite an attractive one. Perhaps you can suggest something a little more filling.”

The king clapped his hands, the platters were removed, and, without thinking, Milo quickly suggested, “Well, in that case, I think we ought to have a square meal of——”

“A square meal it is,” shouted the Humbug again. The king clapped his hands once more and the waiters reappeared carrying plates heaped high with steaming squares of all sizes and colors.

“Ugh,” said the Spelling Bee, tasting one, “these are awful.”



No one else seemed to like them very much either, and the Humbug got one caught in his throat and almost choked.

“Time for the speeches,” announced the king as the

plates were again removed and everyone looked glum. “You first,” he commanded, pointing to Milo.

“Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen,” started Milo timidly, “I would like to take this opportunity to say that in all the——”

“That’s quite enough,” snapped the king. “Mustn’t talk all day.”

“But I’d just begun,” objected Milo.

“NEXT!” bellowed the king.

“Roast turkey, mashed potatoes, vanilla ice cream,” recited the Humbug, bouncing up and down quickly.

“What a strange speech,” thought Milo, for he’d heard many in the past and knew that they were supposed to be long and dull.

“Hamburgers, corn on the cob, chocolate pudding—p-u-d-d-i-n-g,” said the Spelling Bee in his turn.

“Frankfurters, sour pickles, strawberry jam,” shouted Officer Shrift from his chair. Since he was taller sitting than standing, he didn’t bother to get up.

And so down the line it went, with each guest rising briefly, making a short speech, and then resuming his place. When everyone had finished, the king rose.

“Pâté de foie gras, soupe à l’oignon, faisan sous cloche, salade endive, fromages et fruits et demi-tasse,” he said carefully, and clapped his hands again.



The waiters reappeared immediately, carrying heavy, hot trays, which they set on the table. Each one contained the exact words spoken by the various guests, and they all began eating immediately with great **gusto**.

“Dig in,” said the king, poking Milo with his elbow and looking disapprovingly at his plate. “I can’t say that I think much of your choice.”

“I didn’t know that I was going to have to **eat my words**,” objected Milo.

“Of course, of course, everyone here does,” the king grunted. “You should have made a tastier speech.”

Milo looked around at everyone busily stuffing himself and then back at his own unappetizing plate. It certainly didn’t look worth eating, and he was so very hungry.

“Here, try some **somersault**,” suggested the duke. “It improves the flavor.”

“Have a **rigmarole**,” offered the count, passing the breadbasket.

“Or a **ragamuffin**,” seconded the minister.

“Perhaps you’d care for a **synonym bun**,” suggested the duke.

“Why not wait for your **just desserts**?” mumbled the earl **indistinctly**, his mouth full of food.

“How many times must I tell you not to **bite off more**

than you can chew?” snapped the undersecretary, patting the distressed earl on the back.

“**In one ear and out the other**,” scolded the duke, attempting to stuff one of his words through the earl’s head.

“If it isn’t one thing, it’s another,” chided the minister.

“**Out of the frying pan into the fire**,” shouted the count, burning himself badly.

“Well, you don’t have to **bite my head off**,” screamed the terrified earl, and flew at the others in a rage.

The five of them scuffled wildly under the table.

“STOP THAT AT ONCE,” thundered Azaz, “or I’ll banish the lot of you!”

“Sorry.”

“Excuse me.”

“Forgive us.”



“Pardon.”

“Regrets,” they apologized in turn, and sat down glaring at each other.

The rest of the meal was finished in silence until the king, wiping the gravy stains from his vest, called for dessert. Milo, who had not eaten anything, looked up eagerly.

“We’re having a special treat today,” said the king as the delicious smells of homemade pastry filled the banquet hall. “By royal command the pastry chefs have worked all night in the half bakery to make sure that _____”

“The half bakery?” questioned Milo.

“Of course, the half bakery,” snapped the king. “Where do you think **half-baked ideas** come from? Now, please don’t interrupt. By royal command the pastry chefs have worked all night to——”

“What’s a half-baked idea?” asked Milo again.

“Will you be quiet?” growled Azaz angrily; but, before he could begin again, three large serving carts were wheeled into the hall and everyone jumped up to help himself.

“They’re very tasty,” explained the Humbug, “but they don’t always agree with you. Here’s one that’s very good.” He handed it to Milo and, through the icing and nuts, Milo saw that it said, “THE EARTH IS FLAT.”

“People swallowed that one for years,” commented the Spelling Bee, “but it’s not very popular these days —d-a-y-s.” He picked up a long one that stated “THE MOON IS MADE OF GREEN CHEESE” and hungrily bit off the part that said “CHEESE.” “Now *there’s* a half-baked idea,” he said, smiling.

Milo looked at the great assortment of cakes, which were being eaten almost as quickly as anyone could read them. The count was munching contentedly on “IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS” and the king was busy slicing one that stated “NIGHT AIR IS BAD AIR.”



“I wouldn’t eat too many of those if I were you,” advised Tock. “They may look good, but you can get terribly sick of them.”

“Don’t worry,” Milo replied; “I’ll just wrap one up for later,” and he folded his napkin around “EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR THE BEST.”

8. The Humbug Volunteers

“Couldn’t eat another thing,” puffed the duke, clutching his stomach.

“Oh my, oh dear,” agreed the minister, breathing with great difficulty.

“M-m-m-m-f-f-m-m,” mumbled the earl, desperately trying to swallow another mouthful.

“Thoroughly stuffed,” sighed the count, loosening his belt.

“Full up,” grunted the undersecretary, reaching for the last cake.

As everyone finished, the only sounds to be heard were the creaking of chairs, the pushing of plates, the licking of spoons, and, of course, a few words from the Humbug.

“A delightful **repast**, delicately prepared and elegantly served,” he announced to no one in particular. “A feast

of rare bouquet. My compliments to the chef, by all means; my compliments to the chef.” Then, with a most distressed look on his face, he turned to Milo and gasped, “Would you kindly fetch me a glass of water? I seem to have a touch of indigestion.”

“Perhaps you’ve eaten too much too quickly,” Milo remarked sympathetically.

“Too much too quickly, too much too quickly,” wheezed the uncomfortable bug, between gulps. “To be sure, too much too quickly. I most certainly should have eaten too little too slowly, or too much too slowly, or too little too quickly, or taken all day to eat nothing, or eaten everything in no time at all, or occasionally eaten something any time, or perhaps I should have ——” And he toppled back, exhausted, into his chair and continued to mumble indistinctly.

“Attention! Let me have your attention!” insisted the king, leaping to his feet and pounding the table. The command was entirely unnecessary, for the moment he began to speak everyone but Milo, Tock, and the distraught bug rushed from the hall, down the stairs, and out of the palace.

“Loyal subjects and friends,” continued Azaz, his voice echoing in the almost empty room, “once again on this gala occasion we have——”

“Pardon me,” coughed Milo as politely as possible, “but everyone has gone.”

“I was hoping no one would notice,” said the king sadly. “It happens every time.”



“They’ve all gone to dinner,” announced the Humbug weakly, “and just as soon as I catch my breath I

shall join them.”

“That’s ridiculous. How can they eat dinner right after a banquet?” asked Milo.

“SCANDALOUS!” shouted the king. “We’ll put a stop to it at once. From now on, by royal command, everyone must eat dinner before the banquet.”

“But that’s just as bad,” protested Milo.

“You mean just as good,” corrected the Humbug. “Things which are equally bad are also equally good. Try to look at the bright side of things.”

“I don’t know which side of anything to look at,” protested Milo. “Everything is so confusing and all your words only make things worse.”

“How true,” said the unhappy king, resting his regal chin on his royal fist as he thought fondly of the old days. “There must be something we can do about it.”

“Pass a law,” the Humbug suggested brightly.

“We have almost as many laws as words,” grumbled the king.

“Offer a reward,” offered the bug again.

The king shook his head and looked sadder and sadder.

“Send for help.”

“Drive a bargain.”

“Pull the switch.”

“File a brief.”

“Lower the boom.”

“Toe the line.”

“Raise the bridge.”

“Bar the door,” shouted the bug, jumping up and down and waving his arms. Then he promptly sat down as the king glanced furiously in his direction.

“Perhaps you might allow Rhyme and Reason to return,” said Milo softly, for he had been waiting for just such an opportunity to suggest it.

“How nice that would be,” said Azaz, straightening up and adjusting his crown. “Even if they were a bother at times, things always went so well when they were here.” As he spoke he leaned back on the throne, clasped his hands behind his head, and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. “But I’m afraid it can’t be done.”

“Certainly not; it can’t be done,” repeated the Humbug.

“Why not?” asked Milo.

“Why not indeed?” exclaimed the bug, who seemed equally at home on either side of an argument.

“Much too difficult,” replied the king.

“Of course,” emphasized the bug, “much too difficult.”

“You could if you really wanted to,” insisted Milo.

“By all means, if you really wanted to, you could,” the Humbug agreed.

“How?” asked Azaz, glaring at the bug.

“How?” inquired Milo, looking the same way.

“A simple task,” began the Humbug, suddenly wishing he were somewhere else, “for a brave lad with a stout heart, a steadfast dog, and a serviceable small automobile.”

“Go on,” commanded the king.

“Yes, please,” seconded Milo.

“All that he would have to do,” continued the worried bug, “is travel through miles of **harrowing** and hazardous countryside, into unknown valleys and uncharted forests, past yawning chasms and trackless wastes, until he reached Digitopolis (if, of course, he ever reached there). Then he would have to persuade the Mathemagician to agree to release the little princesses—and, of course, he’d never agree to agree to anything that you agreed with. And, anyway, if he did, you certainly wouldn’t agree to it.

“From there it’s a simple matter of entering the **Mountains of Ignorance**, full of **perilous pitfalls and ominous overtones**—a land to which many venture but few return, and whose evil demons slither slowly from peak to peak in search of prey. Then an effortless climb

up a two-thousand-step circular stairway without railings in a high wind at night (for in those mountains it is always night) to the Castle in the Air.”

He paused momentarily for breath, then began again.

“After a pleasant chat with the princesses, all that remains is a leisurely ride back through those chaotic crags whose frightening fiends have sworn to tear any intruder limb from limb and devour him down to his belt buckle.

“And, finally, after the long ride back, a **triumphal** parade (if, of course, there is anything left to parade) followed by hot chocolate and cookies for everyone.” The Humbug bowed low and sat down once again, very pleased with himself.

“I never realized it would be so simple,” said the king, stroking his beard and smiling broadly.

“Quite simple indeed,” concurred the bug.

“It sounds dangerous to me,” said Milo.

“Most dangerous, most dangerous,” mumbled the Humbug, still trying to be in agreement with everybody.

“Who will make the journey?” asked Tock, who had been listening very carefully to the Humbug’s description.

“A very good question,” replied the king. “**But there**

is one far more serious problem.”

“What is it?” asked Milo, who was rather unhappy at the turn the conversation had taken.

“I’m afraid I can tell you that only when you return,” cried the king, clapping his hands three times. As he did so, the waiters rushed back into the room and quickly cleared away the dishes, the silver, the tablecloth, the table, the chairs, the banquet hall, and the palace, leaving them all suddenly standing in the market place.

“Of course you realize that I would like to make the trip myself,” continued Azaz, striding across the square as if nothing had happened; “but, since it was your idea, you shall have all the honor and fame.”

“But you see——” began Milo.

“Dictionopolis will always be grateful, my boy,” interrupted the king, throwing one arm around Milo and patting Tock with the other. “You will face many dangers on your journey, but fear not, for I have brought you this for your protection.”

He drew from inside his cape a small heavy box about the size of a schoolbook and handed it ceremoniously to Milo.

“In this box are all the words I know,” he said. “Most of them you will never need, some you will use con-

stantly, but with them you may ask all the questions which have never been answered and answer all the questions which have never been asked. All the great books of the past and all the ones yet to come are made with these words. With them there is no obstacle you cannot overcome. All you must learn to do is use them well and in the right places.”

Milo accepted the gift with thanks and the little group walked to the car, still parked at the edge of the square.

“You will, of course, need a guide,” said the king, “and, since he knows the obstacles so well, the Humbug has cheerfully volunteered to accompany you.”

“Now see here,” cried the startled bug, for that was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.



Milo and Tock wondered what strange adventures lay ahead. The Humbug speculated on how he'd ever become involved in such a hazardous undertaking. And the crowd waved and cheered wildly, for, while they didn't care at all about anyone arriving, they were always very pleased to see someone go.

"You will find him dependable, brave, resourceful, and loyal," continued Azaz, and the Humbug was so overcome by the flattery that he quite forgot to object again.

"I'm sure he'll be a great help," cried Milo as they drove across the square.

"I hope so," thought Tock to himself, for he was far less sure.

"Good luck, good luck; do be careful!" shouted the king, and down the road they went.